

## 75<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry

*A waif of the war: or the History of the 75<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry, embracing the entire campaigns of the Army of the Cumberland.* Dodge, William Sumner. Chicago: Church and Goodman, 1866, 241 pp.

p. 56-73

The movement upon the enemy at Murfreesboro commenced on the morning of December 26, 1862. The announcement was made Christmas night, and was greeted by the troops with a wild shrill clamor which bespoke willing hearts and an assurance of victory. The day dawned drearily. Thick volumes of mist hugged the valleys, and dense masses of black clouds overhung the heavens. Soon the reveille rolled through the cordon of drowsy camps encircling Nashville, then all was activity and life.

Bragg did not expect Rosecrans to make a winter campaign, but supposed he had established winter quarters on Mill Creek; and therefore had settled his at Murfreesboro. Hugging this delusion to his bosom, he had sent a large force of his cavalry, under Forrest, into West Tennessee to harass General Grant and another under Morgan into Kentucky to destroy Rosecrans communications. The absence of this powerful arm of the Confederate service was deemed by General Rosecrans as the opportune occasion for striking a blow. Positive information was had that the forces of Polk and Kirby Smith were at Murfreesboro, and that Hardee's corps was on the Shelbyville and Nolensville pikes, between Triune and Eaglesville. The army therefore moved in three columns to wit:

McCook by the Nolensville Pike to Triune.

Thomas, on McCook's right, down the Franklin and Wilson pikes, , threatening Hardee's right, then to fall in by the crossroads to Nolensville.

Crittenden, down the Murfreesboro Pike, to LaVergne.

With Thomas' command at Nolensville, McCook was to attack Hardee at Triune, and if the enemy reinforced Hardee, Thomas was to support McCook.

If McCook beat Hardee, or Hardee retreated, and the enemy attacked us at Stewart's Creek, Crittenden was to fight him. Thomas was to come in on the left flank, and McCook, after detaching a division to pursue or observe Hardee, if retreating southward, was to move with his two remaining divisions on his rear.

A 6 o'clock, Davis' division moved down the Edmondson Pike to Prim's Blacksmith shop and thence by a dirt road to Nolensville, with General Johnson's division in the rear. The dirt roads traveled by our troops, especially that taken by Davis' division from the blacksmith shop, were very rugged and almost impassable, for it rained incessantly and in torrents all day; but the prospect of meeting the foe cheered our men and their enthusiasm increased as the thermometer fell. They manifested the disposition soldiers ought when going into danger-their hearts full of confidence. The enemy was encountered within about 10 miles of Mill Creek, but was easily driven by Davis' escort. When within a mile of Nolensville, Davis ascertained that the town was occupied in force by infantry, cavalry, and artillery. He prepared for action. His first brigade, consisting of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Indiana, 59<sup>th</sup>, 74<sup>th</sup>, and 75<sup>th</sup> Illinois, and Pinney's 5<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Battery, under

Colonel P. Sidney Post, was immediately deployed for an advance on the town. The battery was posted so as to command the town, and all the approaches from the southwest. At this time the rebel cavalry took a position on the hills southwest of town to flank Davis' position. A rebel battery also opened fire of Post's Brigade. Pinney's battery silenced the enemy's guns and caused his cavalry to fall back beyond the town. Davis second brigade, Colonel William P Carlin commanding, formed its line of battle of Post's right. His third brigade, command by Colonel W.E. Woodruff, was deployed on the right of Carlin, to check any effort to turn the right flank of his line. They advanced in splendid style, considering the depth of mud to be waded through, the skirmishers driving everything before them. Post's brigade pushed for Triune-Pinney's battery on the pike, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Indiana and 74<sup>th</sup> Illinois on the right of the pike, the 59<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> Illinois on the left. The enemy was posted in a position of great natural strength, some two miles below the town at a place called Knob's Gap, his line resting on the hills to the right and left of the pike, with one section on the road and another near it. The rebels opened at long range; but our line undaunted, moved straight on and soon Pinney, from a knob on the left of the road, opened fire at short range with his guns, while Post's brigade, moving with the steadiness of automatons, carried the heights in its front, compelling the enemy to abandon one of his guns. Hotchkiss' battery also opened a steady fire, while Carlin's brigade carried the heights on the right of the road, charging the battery direct, capturing two of the guns, and in cooperation with Post, completely routed the enemy from his position. Woodruff's brigade, meantime, had driven the enemy upon the extreme right, and thus maintained our line intact. This success stimulated the men to new energy and daring. They frequently broke out in loud cheers, which were taken up by each regiment in turn, and echoed in strong reverberations among the hills.

At daylight on the 26<sup>th</sup>, the corps moved again forward, the cavalry under General Stanley in the advance, followed by General Johnson's division, Sheridan closely supporting, with Davis in the rear. A wintry fog covered the country, so that only the most prominent points could be seen, making successful movement of troops a difficult undertaking. When a mile or so advanced, a large force of the enemy's cavalry, supported by artillery, opened on our cavalry. The skirmish growing animated, Kirk's brigade pushed forward and soon compelled the enemy to retire. When some half mile from Triune, the enemy was found strongly posted, and another sharp skirmish ensued, in which the 29<sup>th</sup> Indiana and 34<sup>th</sup> Illinois of General Kirk's brigade, charged a rebel battery, but the artillerists did not stand to receive the shock.

Night coming on, the troops bivouacked one mile south of Triune. The rain had descended in torrents the greater part of the day, making marching still more tedious. Here the corps encamped during the 28<sup>th</sup>, awaiting the developments of the enemy on Thomas and Crittenden's fronts. Meantime a reconnaissance was made by General Willich, in the direction of Shelbyville, and developed the fact that Hardee's forces had retreated to Murfreesboro. General Thomas' divisions met no resistance and arrived at Nolensville on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Crittenden's Corps drove the enemy from LaVergne, and charged him at Stewart's creek, saving the bridge-a very important one to us. Here the left wing rested during the 28<sup>th</sup> also. Thus, on this day, the army was at rest, while the commanding general perfected his plans for further movement.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of December the army was again in motion, the right wing on the Bole Jack road, which leads into the Wilkinson and Murfreesboro Pike. Davis' division again

led the advance, Sheridan at close support. The next day the entire corps crossed Stewart's Creek, and encamped for the night at Overall's Creek, 3 ½ miles from Murfreesboro.

It was now definitely known that the rebels would make a stand in front of Murfreesboro. The 30<sup>th</sup> was to see our army in position, and the next day was to become memorable in the annals of our land, as the beginning of a combat, fearful in its intensity and frightful in its losses, and yet ineffectually telling on the fortunes of the rival republics, under whose banners the armies so desperately fought.

Crittenden was first on the line of battle this day. Sturdy Thomas came in next, joining his lines on the right of Palmer; the chivalrous Rousseau lying as reserve of Negley. General Sheridan, after stubborn fighting, arrived opposite to Negley, and established his line of battle on the right of the Wilkinson pike. Woodruff's brigade moved to the front with much steadiness, driving the rebels out of the timber in his front and joining General Sill's right. Carlin steadily pressed the enemy in his front, but as he was establishing his line, the enemy opened on his right with a terrific fire of shot and shell, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Illinois, galled into madness, charged the battery, but meeting an infantry force, and being murderously used, was compelled to fall back to the brigade. Post's brigade, with the 74<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> Illinois deployed on the skirmish line under command of Captain Hale, acting major of the 75<sup>th</sup>, was still further to the right, and then constituting the extreme right of the army. They moved to the aid of the 21<sup>st</sup> Illinois; but in crossing a deep ravine, were also opened on with shell and canister, and compelled first to lie down, then retreat. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Indiana was protecting the right flank from the enemy's cavalry, while the 59<sup>th</sup> Illinois supported Pinney's battery. Captain hale here displayed great gallantry and excellent judgment. He was wounded through the fleshy part of his leg, and had his horse shot from under him during this affair. Several here in the 75<sup>th</sup> were wounded, but as their names are not designated as such on this particular day, they must come under the aggregate for the battle. Post's brigade in line, Kirk and Willich joined him, thus completing the battle order.

Across the narrow valley which extended along our front was posted the rebel army, in order of battle, its right wing resting upon the heights on the east bank of Stones River, intersecting the river parallel to our left front, the center extending along a ridge through cotton fields and timber, which sloped gradually towards our center; its left wing tracing the crest of a rough and rocky ridge, partially screened by timber, and terminating some half mile south of the Franklin turnpike.

The 30<sup>th</sup> of December had been a dreary day. Rain had fallen almost constantly, and the soldiers were saturated with water. Toward the night, the wind swept coldly from the north, and no bivouac fires were allowed on the *real* front; the aspect was truly cheerless. At midnight the stars faintly twinkled through the cloud-rifts which still hung heavily overhead, portentous of rain. Within a half mile of each other lay two mighty armies, in the most perfect silence, waiting for the morning's light, to rush together in the deadly rencontre. Peace then ruled supreme—"The forest's fretted vale, and leafy domes above them bent, and solitude-sol eloquent!"-

The contest began at the break of day on Wednesday, the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, by a most audacious attack on Johnson's division; and another almost simultaneously on Sheridan, then another on Davis'. On Johnson's front-on the devoted brigades of Kirk and Willich-was massed more than half the Rebel army under McCown, Cheatham, and

Cleburne. It was a most desperate struggle, and resulted in the immediate discomfiture of Johnson's men, in the death wound of the gallant and gifted Kirk, in the capture of brave old Willich. Captain Pinney stood by his guns in a perfect frenzy of impatience to open on the enemy as he passed in front of Davis' pickets; but as his object could not, in the dim light, be clearly discerned, he was not permitted to fire. It was a sad mistake; for as the enemy moved the flank, within rifle shot, Pinney could have dealt death in his ranks, and aided by Post's brigade, all of whom were anxious for the fray, the tide of battle might have been turned, and the dreadful disaster which occurred to the right wing prevented, or at least stayed until better prepared for attack. The retreat of Johnson's division left Post's brigade exposed to a flank movement, which the enemy was now rapidly executing, and compelled it to fall back, and partially change front. In the execution of this movement, Companies E and H of the 75<sup>th</sup> Illinois under command of Lieutenant Blodgett, were on the picket line, and he received instructions to contest the rebel advance as skirmishers. The tide of battle pushed back so rapidly as to leave these companies so far in the advance that some of Carlin's brigade-already furiously engaged with another force of the enemy, which had obliqued to the left from its attack on Johnson,-mistook it for a rebel force, dimly seen through the tree and bushes, and fired into it a terrible volley, fortunately doing but little damage.

They finally withdrew to the regiment. The brigade kept falling back, changing front three times, so that now its line of battle was perpendicular to its original formation. At last, stationed behind a fence at the edge of the timber, it awaited the rebel onset. Davis' troops resisted the terrible battle shock of the enemy for some time; but at length were compelled to give way. Nearly one fourth of their number lay wither dead or wounded on the ensanguined field, proving how determined their resistance had been. But again and again, Johnson's troops, though stubbornly fighting, constantly give way, and as the right doubles back on the center, Davis is forced to retire also; each tree in the belt of timber provides a temporary shelter, and not until an enfilade fire weakened the line, would they leave the position. Again it fell back across a large cotton field, and here a most determined resistance was made. Here Captain Pinney was mortally wounded while serving his own guns and mowing huge roadways in the rebel ranks. He was left on the field where his gallant works were done. Here the 59<sup>th</sup> Illinois received magnificently the charge of the enemy, and with fixed bayonets held him at bay. During this retreat Captain Hale was wounded in the hip by a splinter from his sabre blade, which was knocked out by a rebel bullet. Here, too, dashed up a mounted officer, very near the 75<sup>th</sup>'s line, as if to give an order, and was supposed to be one of our own generals until a gust of wind blew back his overcoat, disclosing his uniform, when he was found to be a rebel. Several muskets were instantly leveled on him; he escaped unharmed and disappeared into the cedars. The rebel tide again surged onward and backward flow Davis' brigades. Now they are near the Murfreesboro pike, which intersects the battle ground, and is the key to the position, for on it are all of the federal supply and ammunition trains. These captured, our doom would be sealed, and victory inevitably perch on the rebel banners. The enemy, thus far, had been repulsed each time on Davis' and Sheridan's fronts; but his heavy turning columns so completely enveloped the right, that the positions could not be maintained. They had fallen back a full mile and a half. It was now 2 o'clock in the afternoon, while the furious onset had commenced at a little after six in the morning. Eight hours of conflict, with a foe so overwhelming, proves itself that there was no

disgraceful panic, such as some cowardly newspaper reporters back in Nashville has stated, thereby stigmatizing with shame the fair name of our soldiers, and depriving them of their most valued jewel-honor. It was a serious question now, whether this position – the last one our army could hope to take- could be held. Johnson's division was already there, a prolongation of Davis' line, and fighting with the desperation of despair. And happily for him, his gallant division, the first to be compromised, was now the first, alongside pugnacious Rousseau to hurl back the enemy with a force that demoralized him completely. Davis, seeing this, and seeing the enemy, who had so terribly menaced his own front, again moving upon his decimated brigades, in columns of battalion front, four battalions deep, resolved to imitate Johnson, and crush him if it were a human possibility. And here, most opportunely, other help arrived. Negley's and Rousseau's divisions came upon the ground. Boldly the foe marched up, short but desperately bloody the struggle. A dazzling sheet of flame burst from the firm ranks of our heroes, which quickly shivered their lines, and aided by several batteries which now opened with a terrific roar, shaking the very earth, crushed into flying fragments his solid masses, and thus, for the right wing, ended the battle for this day. The scene now presented was awful. The smoke of battle had lifted, and the field could again be surveyed. The ground was literally covered with dead and wounded, friend and foe, cruelly mangled, scores of horses, broken gun carriages, and caissons. Davis' troops, now exhausted in ammunition and in strength, were relieved, and did not participate in the engagement until late in the afternoon. As the division moved into position on the newly established line of battle, some skirmishing ensued, which nightfall ended.

Thus fought General Davis' division in that eventful Wednesday's battle. For more than 8 hours it resisted the engulfing wave of rebel prowess contesting its advance by every obstacle possible. Nowhere, in all that contested battle front, was a firmer countenance presented; and nowhere, save on Rousseau's front, did the enemy charge more desperately, or meet with more disastrous receptions. And among the regiments which here distinguished themselves, none did more valiant service or is more entitled to honorable mention than the 75<sup>th</sup> Illinois. Its loss was not as heavy as that in many other commands, while it effected equally decisive results. 2 were killed, 25 wounded, and 21 taken prisoners, among them Captain A. McMoore of Company D. The gallantry of Colonel Bennett, Major Watson, and Captain Hale elicited encomiums of praise and mention in the reports of superiors. At one time as the regiment fell back into its position in the timber, Major Watson and Sergeant George G. Messer remained behind for several minutes and discharged several volleys into the advancing foe.

The company commanders, Captains McMoore, Frost and Storey, Lieutenants Shaw, Sanford, Thompson and Parker, and Sergeants Elisha Bull, Frank Bingham, and Augustus Johnson, commanding companies B, H, and I respectively, did their duty well, and proved themselves gallant, discreet, and competent for the position they held. Thus amid the glorious results of such a battle, it is a pleasing duty to mention the names of the gallant living, and it is equally painful to mention those of the heroic dead. Privates Washington Wood, of Company C and Sydney Merriman of Company K, fell in the heat of the fray, as soldiers love to fall-with their faces to the foe.

Never before was the service of medical department so promptly executed. Surgeons braved danger nobly, and suffered captivity, that they might administer to our wounded. Among this class was Assistant Surgeon John C. Corbus.

Wednesday night it rained, and many during the conflict had abandoned their knapsacks, blankets, and shelter tents, so they must patiently endure their sufferings hoping for the New Year and sunlight. By 10 o'clock the clouds had drifted away and a breeze swept refreshingly from the north, and dried the mud. The sky became a clear, deep blue, and nature smiled lovingly on yesterday's field of carnage.

The results of Wednesday's battles compelled a readjustment of the Federal lines. The left wing was retired 250 yards from its former position, the extreme left resting on Stones River, the right on the Nashville railroad and turnpike; joining this was Thomas' corps, then came Johnson, Sheridan and Davis, the whole line running near northwest and refused to the right, resting along the slope of a ridge covered with heavy cedar growth. Davis' division extending across and to the rear of the Nashville Pike. The cavalry was further down the pike to Overall's Creek.

The first of January passed without any general engagement. There were several artillery duels along the lines; skirmishing with pickets was frequent, and reconnaissances pushed forward to all points where it was supposed the enemy was concealed to observation. General Rosecrans made a personal observation of every part of his lines, and directed several changes in position, and so handsomely did he arrange things that the designs of the enemy were defeated. The right wing threw up breastworks for defense, and in this work the 74<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> Illinois were engaged. During this day, while Company F was deployed on the skirmish line, General Rosecrans rode along and told the men "they ought to retire a little as they were too much exposed." Captain Vorrey replied, "We were ordered General to hold this particular point of the line, and mean to do it." The general rejoined, "That is right; obey orders."

Toward night General Crittenden was ordered to occupy a point opposite a ford near which his left rested. He first sent a brigade, then the division of van Cleve, supported by another brigade of Palmer's.

About 3 o'clock in the afternoon-having during the morning opened his batteries on our center, and made strong demonstrations of attack on our right, a feint to cover his real intentions- the enemy debouched from the woods opposite to Van Cleve and moved directly on him with heavy masses of infantry, battalion front, supported by three batteries of artillery. It was Breckinridge's command advancing to the banquet of death. Van Cleve was forced back, and his men rushed across the river in great confusion, closely followed by the enemy. The artillery of the left was now ranged to meet the foe when that brave and true soldier Colonel John F. Miller, commanding a brigade in Negley's division, perceived a splendid opportunity to attack the enemy in flank, ordered his brigade forward, charge bayonets, routed him, and turned the fortunes of the day, capturing 4 cannon, and one stand of colors, besides strewing the ground with heaps of slain. It is right here, that truth should be asserted in order that history may be vindicated. The glory of this grand success if universally given to Negley. Negley was a good soldier, but he had one failing-that of overcautiousness. He never ventured. At the time of the rout of Van Cleve, he was in the rear, aiding the former general in rallying his disorganized brigades. He was not at the front when the opportune moment presented itself, which Colonel Miller perceived and embraced. Miller inquired for Negley, to ask leave to charge, but being informed of the mission he was on, he assumed responsibility for the movement himself, and therefore he it was who conceived, ordered, and executed the crowning action of that memorable field of carnage. Jefferson C. Davis' division and

Willich's brigade of Johnson's division were hurried up to support the menaced front; but with the exception of one or two regiments, had no active participation in it, and this aid was not given where Miller operated but on Palmer's front. It seems an injustice in the histories of the rebellion, the credit rests upon Rosecrans and Negley. It won for the latter his second star, while Miller still wore his eagle. Finally after the action at Liberty Gap, where he lost his left eye, the government began to appreciate his services and conferred upon him a brigadier's commission, and subsequently that of Major General by brevet rank.

commingled with the roll of musketry and the booming of cannon, all was excitement on the line of the night wing. Erasmus cried, "Cheer away my boys, I may take you into the fight within 15 minutes!" and as the cheer resounded along the front, up dashed an orderly, with orders to move to the left, as we have before mentioned. It was nearly dark when they arrived and took position on the extreme left of the army. That night they whiz of sharpshooters minies proclaimed watchfulness and audacity on the side of the rebels.